

# The Jews in Rome

# The Jews of ancient Rome

- Who were these Jews?
  1. They were predominantly free persons, whether citizens or converts.
  2. Migrants for purposes of commerce, to join families, to seek employments or to enjoy the attachment to the center of power
  3. Descendants of freed slaves, prisoners of war liberated by their new masters
  4. Captives brought to Rome as a consequence of Pompey's victory in Judaea
- There were four generations enough to wipe out the stigma of the freed man

# Cohesive community

The Jews in Rome maintained ties both to Jerusalem, as demonstrated by adherence to the annual contribution to the Temple (a symbolic as well as a tangible act), and to fellow-Jews elsewhere, exhibited by protests on behalf of their compatriots in Asia Minor.

The community endured and grew in size since the mid 2nd century BCE

**Roman Jews kept a very clear perception of their own identity.**

# Visibility

- The Jews' peculiar practices were undisguised and conspicuous, hence readily identifiable and easily censured when convenient for the government
- No disguise, no hiding

# Representation of the Jews

- Roman writers either treated Jews with indifference or regarded them with scorn and disdain.
- The Revolt itself made hardly a dent in their representations.
- Sneers and caricatures occur as readily in Persius and Petronius before the war as they do in Martial or Juvenal after. And Seneca can mock the Sabbath observance in the same terms as Tacitus.
- Romans were certainly not alarmed by Jewish economic power, population growth, proselytism, or the infiltration of Mosaic law.
- How could one take seriously a people who adhered to silly superstitions, who would have no social or sexual intercourse with Gentiles, who begged alms and told fortunes, who wasted every seventh day in idleness, who stained their windows with smoke and soot from lighting lamps, who would not give you directions in the street, who did not eat ham or pork chops, and who mangled their genitals?

# Expulsion in 19 CE

- Circumstances changed in the reign of Tiberius. A notorious episode occurred in 19 CE, much discussed, analyzed, and brawled over.
- The emperor turned on the Jews and expelled them from Rome, perhaps from Italy—the first such deed in a century and a half.
- Had the Jews suddenly made themselves offensive or reprehensible?
- Were they victimized by a hostile ruler prepared to undo generations of laissez-faire?
- Did they become embroiled in a larger social and economic upheaval from which they suffered governmental backlash?
- The event itself cannot be dismissed or discounted.
- Several sources converge, both Jewish and pagan, to record it, each in a somewhat different way but all pointing to the same episode.

# The case of the expulsion

- An unscrupulous character, a fugitive from justice in Judaea, showed up in the city and enlisted three other dubious characters in a scheme to wheedle money out of the aristocratic lady Fulvia, who had become a convert to Judaism. The wicked plotters induced Fulvia to supply purple and gold for the Temple in Jerusalem—only to pocket the goods themselves.
- This scam too was reported to Tiberius, who proceeded to crack down on the Jewish offenders, but not on them alone. The emperor ordered the entire Jewish community to evacuate Rome. Four thousand of the Jews were rounded up by the consuls, who enlisted them in the army and forthwith sent them off to Sardinia, a hell-hole for military service. Others who refused to enroll suffered unspecified penalties.

# Cicero

- Cicero branded the Jewish faith as "barbaric superstition," deplored its practices as deliberately divorced from the splendor of the empire, the seriousness of the Roman name, and the ancestral institutions.
- He boasted that the defeat of Jews at Roman hands proved its unworthiness in the eyes of the Divine.
- None of this, as is now generally recognized, amounts to antisemitism.



# „Mob“

- Were the Jews ousted as a turbulent and unruly people? Did their participation in disturbances during the early years of Tiberius provoke expulsion from Rome? That thesis has drawn some support in recent years.
- One can certainly find ancient references to the Jews as disorderly, troublesome types. Cicero branded them as such at the trial of Flaccus.
- Suetonius reported that they "flocked" around the funeral bier of Caesar.
- Horace, like Cicero, described them as a "mob".

# Judeophobia

- Did the uprising in Palestine bring to the surface latent "anti-semitism" in Rome, or what some now prefer to characterize as "Judeophobia,,?"
- Did the Roman populace find its anxieties confirmed by this **troublesome** and **vexatious** people, **atheists who scorned the proper gods, misanthropes** who held aloof from normal society, **dangerous proselytizers** who contaminated decent Romans, and **perpetrators of alarming practices** like **refusing to perform duties on the Sabbath, refraining from eating pork, and mutilating their genitals?**
- These are not easy questions to answer. Romans did not deliver themselves of opinions about Jews with any frequency or regularity. But a fair number of remarks exist by various Roman writers from the late Republic through the aftermath of the Great Revolt that offer some entrance

# Perception of the Jewish faith

- To be sure, the Jewish faith did not strike most Romans as especially wise or admirable. Writers in Latin or Greek regularly labeled the creed of the Jews as *superstitio* or *deisidaimonia*. *This calumny goes back at least as far as Cicero, who branded Jewish practice as *barbara superstitio*.* The phrase surfaces subsequently in writers as different as Seneca, Plutarch, Quintilian, and Tacitus. Augustan poet Horace points to a Jew in order to epitomize a faith that demands credulity. The comments are snide and contemptuous, an expression of Roman disdain for practices that seemed **meaningless** or **unintelligible**. They disclose conventional Roman scorn for alien cults and benighted beliefs. But nothing suggests that Jewish devotion to Yahweh gave the slightest reason for anxiety. If the Jews insisted on their foolishness, leave them to it.

# Rejecting authority

- Tacitus, did not much like the ways of the Jews. In his perception, those ways stood at the opposite pole from his own: "**they hold all things profane that we regard as sacred, and everything they consider permissible, we consider anathema.**„

Perhaps some of their rites, he observed, have the justification of antiquity; but all the rest are wicked, foul, and abound in depravity.

- The historian asserts that no statues stand in Jewish cities and none in their temples; they refrain from such adulation toward their own kings and withhold such honor from Roman emperors.<sup>1</sup> The assertion might appear to signify a branding of Jews as recalcitrant subjects who reject the authority of the Roman government.

# Mems inherited from the Greeks

- Jewish peculiarities, of course, did make an impression. From the Roman vantage point, Jews behaved in baffling ways. They held themselves **aloof, kept to their own kind**, were not great social mixers, indeed preferred to avoid the company of others lest they undermine the constancy of their own customs. This conduct could be construed as **antisocial**, indeed as **misanthropy**.

The Greeks had commented on this long before the Romans.

# Seclusion (Tacitean description)

Tacitus included it in his long list of reasons for displeasure with the Jews:

They maintain a rock-steady loyalty among themselves but hate everybody else.

They don't eat with other people; they don't sleep with them.

There is nothing they won't do with one another—but they won't have intercourse with Gentiles.

# Criminality

- Seneca, the first century CE philosopher, described the Jews as a **most pernicious people** (*sceleratissima gens*). The phrase is often cited as emblematic of Roman hostility, an index that Jews were perceived as a nation prone to criminal activities.

# Jewish expansionism

- Seneca observes that the Jewish way of life prevails so widely that it permeates all the lands of the world—so much so that the vanquished impose their laws upon the victors.



# Absurdity

- The comments come in the context of Juvenal's broader mockery of Jewish adherence to the Sabbath, dietary laws, circumcision, and rigorous exclusiveness—all, in Juvenal's eyes, more laughable than dangerous.  
His contrast between Roman *leges* and Jewish *ius* does not present a clash of competing legal and constitutional systems, but a satirist's mode of expressing the absurdity of the Jews' idiosyncratic customs.

# Sabbath

- Plutarch, the late first century CE biographer and collector of arcane information writes in his treatise on banquets, that one of the interlocutors offers the intriguing suggestion that the Jewish Sabbath is a form of Dionysiac festival. The grounds for that hypothesis hardly generate confidence: the term "Sabi" served as a designation for Bacchants, the Jews invite one another to enjoy wine on the Sabbath, and (the clincher) the High Priest wears finery once a week that parallels the garb in which Bacchic celebrants clad themselves. Hence, it seemed reasonable to infer that the Jewish Sabbath provided an occasion for drink and revelry.

# Ridiculing Sabbath

- When they did bother to pass judgment on Jewish observance of the Sabbath, they reckoned it as monumental folly. It became almost a commonplace among pagan writers to ridicule Jews for refusing to fight on the Sabbath. Various caustic comments derided a senseless observance that caused Jerusalem to fall three times because of the Sabbath. In the second century BCE, when the Greek historian **Agatharchides of Cnidus** berated the practice that had delivered Jerusalem into the hands of Ptolemy I. The refrain was picked up by **Strabo**, for whom the decision not to take up arms on the Sabbath allowed Pompey to capture the city. And a century or so later **Frontinus** gave the same explanation for Vespasian's seizure of Jerusalem—even though Vespasian was no longer in Judaea at the time! (His son, Titus was there)

# Abstention from eating pork

- This conspicuous characteristic, regularly associated with the Jews, was well known among Romans and drew frequent comments. Cicero knew of it already in the first century **BCE.239** **Even the** emperors noticed this peculiar habit, as illustrated by a famous joke line attributed to Augustus. In speaking of Herod, ruler of Judaea, who gained wide notoriety for the intrigues and murders that occurred with regularity within his own household, Augustus quipped: "**It's better to be Herod's pig than his son.**" And the emperor Caligula also exhibited familiarity with the dietary restriction. When a delegation of Alexandrian Jews obtained an audience with him in order to argue a case for their rights in Alexandria, the satanic princeps led them a merry chase around the gardens and then asked them mockingly "why don't you eat pork?"—a question that made auditors double up with laughter.

# Circumcision

- Another Jewish custom drew a similar reaction. This one was, to the Roman way of thinking, the most distinctive, even if not the most visible, feature that marked out a Jew: namely, circumcision. For Horace, "circumcised Jews" was a natural expression. Tacitus even supposed that the Jews adopted this peculiar practice precisely in order to make themselves distinct from all other peoples. As Philo noted, circumcision regularly drew ridicule from non-Jews.<sup>251</sup>

# Obsession of circumcision

- In describing a talented Jewish slave who possesses all manner of intellectual and practical skills, **Petronius** remarked that he has but two faults: he is circumcised and he snores (never mind that he is cross-eyed). **Juvenal** alleged that Jews are so exclusive in keeping their own company that they won't direct anyone to a water fountain unless he is circumcised.

**Martial** has a few obscene poems that make reference to circumcision. One is dedicated to the notorious nymphomaniac Caelia who gives her favors to persons of every imaginable ethnic origin, even to the genitals of circumcised Jews.

Another poem refers to a circumcised poet who engages in both plagiarism and pederasty. And still another speaks of a friend who always wore an enormous sheath over his organ, claiming that it allowed him to spare his voice. But when exercising one day, in full view of various spectators (doubtless curious about what lay underneath), the sheath fell off, disclosing that what might have been thought notable for its size was, in fact, notable only for its circumcision.

# Illusory correlations

- The Jews are...
- Ridiculous
- Disrespectful
- Superstitious
- Irrational
- Criminals
- Perilous